DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 171 118 FL 010 270

AUTHOR Dubin, Fraida
TITLE Assessing Sociolinguistic Elements for Inclusion in Second Language Courses.
PUB DATE Oct 78
NOTE 15p.; Paper presented at the Los Angeles Second Language Research Forum (2nd, Los Angeles, October, 1978)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Applied Linguistics; Communication Skills; *Communicative Competence (Languages); Cross Cultural Studies; Cultural Context; *Cultural Factors; *English (Second Language); *Language Instruction; Nonverbal Communication; Pragmatics; *Second Language Learning; Social Behavior; Social Influences; *Sociolinguistics

ABSTRACT

Considerations for communicative competence instruction in second language courses are largely undefined as to exactly what topics of appropriate behavior or rules of social interaction should be included. Sociolinguistics can provide second language teachers with an abundance of analytical material regarding the underlying cultural implications of interaction in English. Following such a recommendation, an ongoing project at the American Language Institute of the University of Southern California utilized an observational and self-assessment questionnaire given to both international students and Americans to test for sociolinguistic needs in acquiring communicative competence. It was found that: (1) both groups replied very similarly with respect to their ability to use appropriate English for interacting in particular social situations, but perhaps for different culture-bound reasons; (2) Americans could not accurately predict how international students would judge themselves; and (3) Americans' subjective evaluations of the international students' classroom performances in role-plays were more critical than those students' self-assessments, perhaps because each group viewed the situations through different culture-bound filters. It is suggested that the questionnaires be designed to explain why students respond as they do (for example, is the interaction rude, funny, or impolite?). Further development of role-plays, sensitizing exercises, and other classroom strategies might give students more sociolinguistic-oriented information about the language they are practicing. The questionnaire used is appended. (MHP)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED171118

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY FRAIDA DUBIN TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

U S DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

Assessing Sociolinguistic Elements for Inclusion in Second Language Courses

by

© Fraida Dubin*

FL010270

A paper delivered at the Los Angeles Second Language Research Forum, October 1978.

* American Language Institute,
University of So. California
Los Angeles, CA. 90007

A B S T R A C T

If there has been any one slogan in the field of second language pedagogy during this decade, it is probably that of communicative competence. For some time now both sociolinguists and second language specialists have been urging course planners and materials writers to deal with topics of appropriate behavior or rules of social interaction. Although much has been written about communicative objectives, considerations of just what elements of social interaction should be included in our courses are largely undefined.

Sociolinguistics can provide us with an abundance of analytical material regarding interaction in English. From this body of work, planners need sound criteria for selecting topics for inclusion in second language courses.

This paper reports an ongoing information gathering project being carried out at the University of Southern California. Questionnaires were given to international students at the American Language Institute in order to elicit self-reports about their ability to use appropriate English for interacting in particular social situations and settings. The results of this work will guide materials writers in preparing course syllabi that focus on communicative situations in which learners have judged themselves to be deficient.

There is an implicit theme in some of the current second language acquisition research reported on at this Forum. That theme asks the question: are classrooms the optimal place for learning languages? Although it is a seductive question to pose, many of us, I believe, cannot afford the luxury of pursuing it very far. Those of us in the language teaching/learning profession who design syllabuses and prepare materials for courses have a vested interest to maintain that language learning can take place in a class. However, while the nature of our roles advises that we keep the classroom as the basic venue for second language learning, at the same time we can make use of the way language is used outside as our classroom model. As yet, though, we are only beginning to explore this goal.

Instead of investigating a set of research problems which may turn out to be professional blind alleys, I prefer to look at questions related to the language classroom and what takes place there. In fact, this paper is a thinly disguised plea, a pitch for research in an area which, though rich with potential, is one that has been relatively ignored.

In this paper, I am concerned with finding ways to make the language we teach in the classroom as related as possible to the language used in the outside world. This ability to use language functionally has been termed communicative competence. With its roots in anthropological linguistics, later to emerge as sociolinguistics, the term communicative competence has become almost a cliché expression in recent years. Nevertheless, it remains a convenient cover term through which to express a point of view towards language.

The recommendation to expand second language courses to include sociolinguistic topics has been made by a number of experts. There is wide recognition that concentration alone on the acquisition of usage -- phonology, morphology, syntax and lexicon -- does not provide students with experience in language use -- knowing how to use language when and with whom. The definition of language use or communicative competence makes some basic assumptions.

It assumes that learners need to be aware of the cultural implications which underlie particular utterances and that such awareness is a requirement for communicating through language. It presupposes that there are both culture-specific rules of discourse and universal rules which somehow make up the data for language learning and that these rules should be presented in contextual situations. Underlying a sociolinguistic view of language, too, is the attitude that communication is a process of applying rules of discourse to convey meaning through a range of linguistic and paralinguistic signs, these signs are culturally and socially specific.

Working within the framework of language as not words alone nor patterns nor sentences, but instead total interaction grounded in a social context, we are faced with many vexing questions. How is language as communication to be presented in our language courses? Are there elements of situation, or theme, or interactional behavior which can be isolated and presented as the stuff that teachers and students spend their time doing in class? What, indeed, is the content we will present to students? Do we try to teach distinct elements? If so, what are they?

In facing problems of course design, I have found that planners must work as pioneers when it comes to deciding what sociolinguistically-derived, or semantics-, pragmatics-, discourse analysis-derived findings students need in order to reach the goal of becoming communicatively competent. Specifically, I am concerned with constructing syllabuses for oral-aural language courses in ESL settings, either so-called skill courses in spoken language, or as part of integrated or comprehensive courses.

The <u>how</u> of teaching communicative competence has received a certain amount of attention in the literature of language pedagogy. Various techniques have been described and are now being utilized in some language classrooms. Among them are sensitizing activities, dramatizations, role-plays, improvisations, simulations,

problem-solving games and so forth. Most of the time these strategies approach the issue in a wholistic way. It may turn out this is the best way, or maybe the only way to deal with the problem. Right now, I do not know. I do not believe that anyone does know. This question is one that I want to return to after presenting some findings from a mini-research project.

If we look at traditional, grammar-based language courses there appear to be various approaches for making decisions concerning what elements to teach. One is the theory-to-practice model. It says, examine the research first and select from that body of work. But all of grammatical theory does not belong in a teaching text. There is a good deal of difference between theoretical grammars and pedagogical grammars. At least with sociolinguistic topics we are not yet at the stage where one generation simply copies the table of contents of the preceeding ones.

When we look at the array of theoretical sources for sociolinguistics, not to mention pragmatics, semantics and discourse analysis, there is a vast library. And all the blindmen are touching different parts of the elephant. There are the speech act theories of Austin, Searle and others which offer one set of postulates. There are the studies of linguistic variation (the work of Bailey, Labov, Fasold) offering another kind of data. There are the studies in presuppositional semantics (Grice's work for example). Yet another source is found in ethnography of speaking (notably Gumperz and Hymes as proponents), providing more attention to cross-cultural evidence. Nor should I omit the ethnomethodologists (Saks and Shegloff, the data collectors, and Garfinkel, the theoretician . . . as well as the richly significant writings of Goffman whose work is filled with insights into our own culture.) There are other important sources I have omitted for lack of space. The point is that we have a data-bank of studies, theoretical ideas, but moving from theory to application is never easy.

Another approach would be to jump right in at the observational level and

and construct course syllabuses based on what experienced practitioners have observed as problem areas. If we reduce communicative competence to not sounding rude, funny or impolite when using the new language with native speakers, what do native speakers who have experience with people learning languages suggest as the elements to include? Some of our familiar, well-thumbed, grammar-based textbooks have taken this approach. I call it the 'rapid review' school.

Observational reports could include as well learners' self-assessments. How do learners perceive their own abilities to interact comfortably or successfully in the new language with its natives? This approach is in keeping with contemporary educational modes in which students are given responsibility for directing their own learning process. "Students, what is it you want to be able to say and do using the new language? We, your teachers, are here to show you how."

I have been conducting an information gathering project with students studying English at the American Language Institute here at USC that has made use of observational and self-assessment measures. The purpose of the project has been to try to identify areas of social interaction which might be included as topics in oral-aural classes. Since I have reported elsewhere (Dubin, 1978) on other aspects of this work, I will briefly describe it and then go on to point out some of the considerations which have arisen as unintentional fall-out from the original questions.

I believe it was Gertrude Stein who once said that any really good question does not have an answer. And another wit has mentioned that in research there are no answers to questions, only continual sets of new questions to ask as the old ones become conventionalized through repetition. My experience with trying to find answers to questions about the content, the <u>what</u> of communicative competence has made me aware that questions, though not necessarily answered by research or answered ambiguously in the process evolve into altogether new questions.

In our intensive program at ALI, we have classes called intercultural conver-

sation. International students (12 - 15 people in a class) meet weekly with American students (3 - 5 people) together with a facilitator. The topics for discussion are ones which give opportunities to share cross-cultural values. They range from personal matters (family, generations, male/female differences) to more societal concerns (minorities, truth-in-advertising, law and freedom).

I was curious about the degree of awareness intermediate level students possessed of their own language behavior in English. Were they conscious of nuances of behavior? Did they feel at a loss for words in particular social situations? I also wanted to know if the Americans who had developed classroom acquaintanceships with international students could add to our fund of information. Did contact alone provide native speakers some degree of awareness of others' social competence in English?

The procedure was as follows: I began by selecting speech acts which could be manifested in reoccurring social interactions familiar to the students. In the Appendix are listed the twenty categories which were included in the questionnaire. The basic situations were selected from two research reports relating to the teaching of social behavior in language classes (Elletson, 1975 and Cheek et al., 1975). The items in the Appendix are synopses of longer, more fully described social interaction scenes.

The fully described situations were in the form of a questionnaire. Students worked alone. Unfamiliar vocabulary was explained. Students graded themselves according to a three-point scale: 1) I wouldn't know how to express myself, or how to say my thoughts in English. 2) I'm not sure if I would say the right thing, but I would say something in English. 3) I feel I would know what to say in English and how to behave appropriately.

The native speakers answered the questionnaire using a three-point scale of: 1) I would feel uncomfortable and would not know what to say. 2) I'd be a little at a loss for words, but I'd manage. 3) I'd know what to say and how to behave.

Our sampling to date contains responses from approximately 150 international students and 35 Americans.

The Americans also answered a second copy of the same questionnaire. On Copy No. 2 they were instructed to predict how the international students had marked their questionnaires. The Americans wrote their predictions at a time when the international students were not present.

The fourth step in the procedure was to use the twenty situations described in the questionnaire for classroom role-plays. The role-plays were carried out in small groups consisting of three to four international students and one American. The Americans judged the role-play performances of the students according to the 1 - 3 scale that the students had used themselves.

As a result of these procedures there were four separate sets of information: 1) international students' self-assessments of the list of social situations. 2) Americans' self-assessments of the situations. 3) Americans' predictions of how they thought international students would judge themselves (observational information). 4) Americans' subjective evaluations of the international students' classroom performances in the role-plays (observational information).

The findings I will report are based on numerical counts. So far in this work impressionistic results have been sufficient since the purpose is to look for guidelines for developing classroom materials.

The first interesting result was counter-intuitive. International students and Americans replied in a strikingly similar way. Both selected the same six situations among the highest ranking ten as a number one, or "I wouldn't know what to say / I would feel uncomfortable in the situation." These six situations are the ones numbered 3, 4, 7, 8, 11 and 13 in the Appendix.

The second interesting finding was in regard to native speakers being able to predict international students' responses. They were <u>not</u> able to predict how the international students would respond. They did not, as a group,

show any special insights into how the questionnaires would be answered by foreign students. Moreover, among themselves, there was little agreement about their predictions. This may have some signifigance as far as using observational data as the input for an item-bank for teaching purposes.

The third finding: In the role-plays, the native speakers judged the international students' enactments as less acceptable than the students had judged themselves. In other words, native speakers were more critical of the students' abilities to handle social interaction in English than the students had been in assessing their own competence. Since the international students represented a variety of language-culture backgrounds, it was felt that any cultural tendency towards either under-rating or over-rating on self-reports could be discounted.

Could the results be used for syllabus planning purposes? Apparently not since natives and non-natives had chosen the same interactions as the most problematic. However, it was felt that there were multiple factors operating. In the case of items #7 and #8 (the two that dealt with death), since the respondents were of a similar age range (roughly 20 to 30 years) their life experiences with death had been infrequent. Regardless of language or culture background, the social interactions connected with the topic were uncomfortable or unfamiliar.

At the opposite end of the pole, item #11, an interactional scene of more vivid, dramatic or physical quality than most of the others -- spilling a drink on someone's clothes -- could have been more easily visualized by all. It might represent a kind of universal situation which called forth the same response from everyone.

Item #3, refusing a request from a charitable organization, may have been ranked as problematic for different reasons by different groups. Some possibly had not experienced the situation. For others, giving to those in need carries a high religious value in their own culture. Encountering the request for giving alms in an American city might cause uncertainty and conflict when it appears in

a different context. The Americans' reactions, on the other hand, could reflect conflicts with the social motivation of charity giving, or the ambivilence of outer actions and inner constraints. Again, in items #4 and #13, apologizing for being forgetful of another's name and turning down an invitation from someone whose company you do not enjoy, are high frequency social situations. More than some of the others, they are likely to be within everyone's experience.

The possible importance about the parallel responses from both groups is that recognition of or having been in the situation does not by itself constitute awareness of appropriate social behavior in the new language. In other words, the two groups gave similar ratings for different culture-bound reasons. Also, familiarity did not provide automatic access to appropriate behavior when judged by native interactors in the sampling.

Further, it was felt that the Americans were not able to predict the international students' responses because they had not observed them in the actual situations. For the most part, they only knew each other in classroom interactions. From this we might draw the implication that course planners who want to implement sociolinguistic topics must procede with caution. They must have considerable interactional experience with students in many situations outside of the classroom before drawing up a definitive syllabus.

Why was it the case that the American respondents judged the international students less competent in performing the role-plays than the students had judged themselves? Why were native-speakers more critical than the non-natives in the study?

A possible explanation may be that the two groups viewed the same situations through different culture-bound filters. The situations themselves are not new or foreign to either group. Speech acts such as complaining, hedging, refusing a request, apologizing, refusing an invitation, etc. are universal interactions -- at least in the contemporary, technological world. The international students

recognized the situations but overlooked . . nuances of appropriate behavior which apprently had been noted by the native-speakers who judged their performances in English.

Interpreting the result of the role-plays in the study in this manner has led me to reconsider many of the classroom strategies currently used for "developing communicative competence." These role-plays, improvisations, simulations, dramatizations and other such activities give students opportunities to practice fluency, but not necessarily to grasp the sociolinguistic elements which relate to the roles. Another way to characterize these activities would be to describe them as overall competence or integrated strategies rather than discrete point devices. In doing so I am borrowing, of course, the distinction which scholars (Briere, 1969) have been developing during the past decade in the field of language testing.

A typical role-play found in a useful textbook (Paulston et al., 1975) involves the familiar situation of an accident in which someone spills something over another person's clothing. (The high-rated situation in our questionnaire.) The explanation of the situation in the textbook, however, does not give the student any information regarding appropriate status designations of the characters, their role relationships, their reciprocal social responsibilities -- no information about how this incident might be played out differently because of its cultural-social setting in an American supermarket rather than in any other city in another part of the world. Is the college student, Robert, whose clumsiness has caused the accident, a stranger in the community? Does he have any social ties with the other characters in the incident? Why should the stock boy, Willy, "complain" because he must clean up the mess? Isn't that his job?

A more limited type of sensitizing exercise such as those described by Brown and Holmes (1977) goes further, I believe, in the direction of actually giving students sociolinguistic-derived information about the language they are

practicing. In one exercise, for example, by matching conversation openers with appropriate settings, students' attention is focused on norms of appropriateness. However, as yet these sensitizing exercises have not appeared in more integrated lessons which reflect the way language occurs in the real world. Another example of sensitizing activities is found in Jacobson (1976), though here the material is more theoretical and even less related to recognizable social contexts.

One of the flaws in the mini-research project described in this paper was that it failed to ask the Americans to give an explanation or analysis of why the role-play performances they judged were unacceptable. Certainly in any further work in this area an important question to ask would be to try to isolate elements that caused students to appear rude, funny or impolite. If we can ask native speakers better questions on questionnaires we may be able to come a bit closer to the goal of isolating elements of communicative competence as it is displayed in its interactional mode.

APPENDIX

Interactional Situations Appraised by Native and Non-Native Speakers:

1. Complaining about an incorrect bill from the university.
2. Not committing yourself to an invitation from a good friend / hedging.
3. Refusing a request for a contribution to a charitable organization.
4. Apologizing for being forgetful of someone's name.
5. Correcting a mistake made consistently by your professor before the class.
6. Closing a conversation with a friend when you are in a hurry.
7. Expressing sympathy over a death in a friend's family.
8. Receiving sympathy from a friend after a death in your family.
9. Apologizing for offending someone with an innocent joke.
10. Refusing a hostess' invitation to take more food.
11. Apologizing for your awkwardness in causing a drink to spill over someone's clothes.
12. Expressing irritation when waiting to make a call from a pay telephone booth.
13. Turning down an invitation politely from someone whose company you do not enjoy.
14. Expressing your innocence when something is broken in a shop while you are browsing.
15. Taking leave of your instructor at the end of an appointment when the conversation has turned to other topics.
16. Expressing suspicion when something is missing from your apartment.
17. Showing concern over a misunderstanding with a friend.
18. Expressing a contrary opinion with acquaintances during a discussion about world politics.
19. Accepting a compliment about your appearance from classmates.
20. Dismissing a door-to-door salesperson.

References

Brière, Eugene J. 1969. Current Trends in Language Testing. TESOL Quarterly 4:3, 333-337.

Candlin, Christopher. 1976. Communicative Language Teaching and The Debt to Pragmatics. In Clea Rameh (ed.) Semantic Theory and Application. Georgetown University Round Table Series on Language and Linguistics. Georgetown Universiy, Wash., D.C

Cheek, W. et al. 1975. Effects of Social Situation on Language Use: Theory and Application. ERIC Document No. ED 101471, FL 006797. Arlington, Va.

Dubin, F. 1973. The Problem Who Speaks Next Considered Cross-Culturally. Action. Peace Corps Training Journal, 1:10, 7-12.

Dubin, F. 1978. Native and Non-Native Appraisals of Interactional Situations. Paper presented at AILA Congress, Montreal, August, 1978.

Elletson, Lorraine Joan. 1975. The Incorporation of Communicative Problem Areas in the ESL Classroom. Master of Arts thesis, the Teaching of English as a Second Language, UCLA.

Grimshaw, Allen D. 1973. Rules, Social Interaction and Language Behavior. TESOL Quarterly, 7:2, 99-116.

Holmes, J. and Dorothy F. Brown. 1977. Sociolinguistic Competence and Second Language Learning. In Breslin, Hammett (eds.) Topics in Culture Learning, v. 5, Honolulu: East-West Center.

Jacobson, Rodolfo. 1976. Incorporating Sociolinguistic Norms in an EFL Program. TESOL Quarterly, 10:4, 411-422.

Kettering, Judith Carl. 1975. Interaction Activities in ESL. Pittsburgh: English Language Institute.

Paulston, Christina B. 1974. Linguistics and Communicative Competence. TESOL Quarterly, 8:4, 347-362.

Paulston, Christina B. et al. 1975. Roleplays in English as a Second Language. Pittsburgh: English Language Institute.

Widdowson, Henry. 1978. Teaching Language as Communication. Oxford University Press.